

Signs point to job growth in Michigan's medical field

John Wisely, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer 6 a.m. EDT October 1, 2014



(Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

The healthiest part of Michigan's future job market appears to be in health.

Nurses, medical secretaries, dental hygienists, paramedics and lab technicians top the list of occupations expected to grow in coming years in Michigan. Other technical jobs, especially in robotics and advanced manufacturing, also will be in demand, according to data compiled by Economic Modeling Specialists for USA TODAY.

These jobs, which require education beyond high school but not necessarily a bachelor's degree, once formed the backbone of the middle class. They typically pay between \$30,000 and \$80,000 a year, not counting overtime.

Overall, Detroit ranked dead last of 125 metro areas in the study in projected growth of so-called middle-skill jobs. Economic Modeling Specialists predicts the state could lose as many as 20,000 middle-skill jobs in coming years.

State officials dispute those projections, noting some of them could be fueled by retirements from an aging workforce.

"We are seeing across the board demand in Metro Detroit," said Amy Cell, senior vice president of talent enhancement for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. "We are projecting growth across the board in manufacturing. We're seeing a lot more with exporting and new startups."

Still, Cell acknowledges that Michigan needs a workforce with skills that are in demand if it hopes to compete for jobs with other states and countries.

Computer programmers currently hold the most coveted status, especially those who write code for mobile applications, Cell said.

Promising students at Michigan universities are wooed with summer internships offered by tech companies that often have them sign six-figure employment contracts before graduation, Cell said.

"The coasts are snapping up these people when they are juniors," Cell said. "A Michigan company that doesn't have an aggressive pipeline development doesn't have a shot at these kids."

But while those job seekers typically come from four-year universities and colleges, many other students and employers, have found better fits in community colleges, two-year programs that typically award associate degrees.

Wayne County Community College in Detroit offers a variety of medical field programs and applications have outpaced openings for years, said Jo Ann Allen Nyquist, who runs the school's dental hygienist program.



Wayne County Community College District Dental Instructor Dr. Karen Gunn (left) of Detroit

Students take a year and a half of prerequisite courses then enroll in the two-year dental hygiene program to earn an associate's degree in applied science. They must pass board certification tests to earn a license.

In addition to classroom work, students learn by working on patients in a clinic the college operates to provide dental care to residents around its campus in northwest Detroit.

"We're not only an educational setting, we're a community setting," Nyquist said.

The program draws a lot of interest in part because dental hygienists can earn \$30 per hour or more, Nyquist said.

The community college program can cost as little as \$25,000, compared with programs run by four-year universities that can cost three times that much, Nyquist said.

looks over the work of dental hygiene student Farah Haidar on Sept. 2, 2014. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Cost "was definitely a factor," said Aisia Austin, 22, of South Rockwood, who is scheduled to graduate from the program next year. Austin said she was always interested in dentistry and chose the program because it offered hope to land a good job.

"I definitely looked up how much they make and how much it's growing," she said.

Melissa Jackson, 22, of Brownstown Township, a Detroit suburb, started eying her career through a vocational program offered at Woodhaven High School, where she graduated in 2010. In high school, she learned things like the numbering of teeth, but also the human side of the business.

"I always wanted to be that person who made the child or the scared adult feel comfortable," she said.

Jackson expects to complete the program next summer and take her board exams in July 2015.

Despite retrenchment in the auto industry, manufacturing continues to offer good paying job opportunities, Cell said.

She pointed to the Michigan Advanced Technician Training program as an example of government and industry working together to create a skilled workforce. It's a modern version of trade school and is modeled after programs in Germany, which has long used apprenticeships to prepare workers to fill technical jobs.

Students enroll in a three-year training program to study mechatronics, information technology and advance product design at a community college.

They alternate eight-week blocks of classroom study with on-the-job training. Employers like Volkswagen, Detroit Diesel and BorgWarner pay the tuition and a salary to the students as they progress through the program. Students graduate with an associate's degree and a job waiting for them.

Cell said that with rapidly changing technology, educators are trying to hit a moving target as they prepare tomorrow's workers. But math, science and technology are never out of style.

"There are certain things where you can't go wrong," she said. "Career camps, science technology, you cannot go wrong. There are things that you can do that are going to have an impact."

Mark Alyea, president emeritus of Alro Steel Corp. in Jackson, about 80 miles west of Detroit, said his steel company recognized a disconnect several years ago when manufacturing customers in the area complained that a lack of skilled workers was limiting their growth.

He said the local schools, the community college and employers were all doing things to address the need, but the efforts weren't coordinated.

"That's one of the reasons we haven't been able to increase our per capita income in Michigan," said Alyea. "We can't fill these good paying middle jobs."

He said many manufacturers near him like the state's advanced technician training program, but they wanted to see something started earlier.

"We didn't like waiting until 13th, 14th, 15th year," he said.

What's more, many of the vocational educational opportunities in local high schools were going to problem students dumped into the program by principals "who just wanted them the hell out of their high schools," Alyea said. "We don't want to waste those spots."

In September, area employers joined with local high schools and Jackson College to launch the Jackson Area College and Career Connection, a new program that connects 11th-grade students with manufacturing companies for job interviews.

Students accepted into the program begin studying for a manufacturing track that teaches them to read blueprints, operate advanced machinery, use computer design software and troubleshoot manufacturing processes. The employer pays half the tuition — about \$6,000 over three years — and the local school district pays the other half.

Co-op work begins in 11th grade and grows each year. Students graduate from high school and spend their 13th year completing an associate's degree, studying at a career center. When they are done, they have full-time jobs waiting for them, many of them paying between \$25 and \$45 an hour.

"They're basically a junior journeyman," Alyea said.

Paul Borener, 17, of Spring Arbor was already enrolled in a precision machining program offered through his high school when he learned about this new program.

"With the middle college, I have been given the opportunity to do something I love and get college credit while I do it," he said.

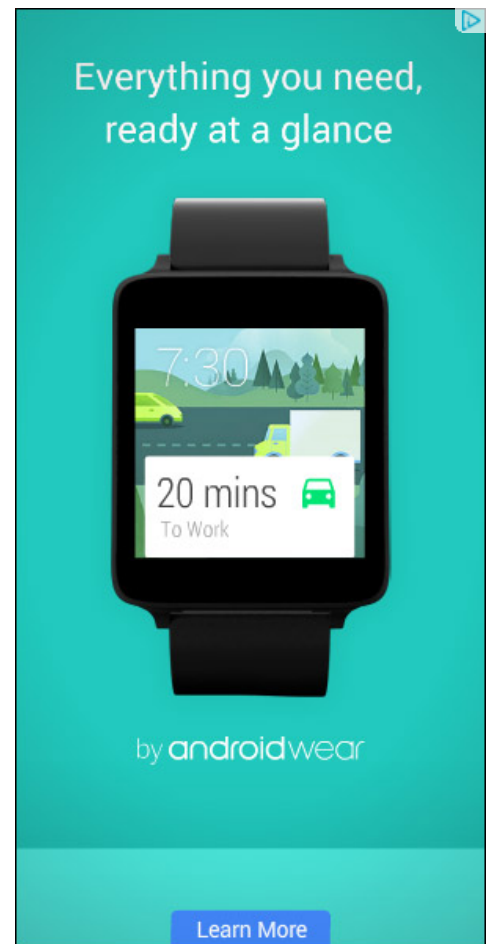
Borener said his father and grandfather were both machinists and he's been interested in it since he was child. He will graduate high school with his class in the spring and then continue at the career center for a 13th year. The program normally begins in 11th grade and allows students to earn an associate's degree in applied science.

Alyea said the program aims to change perceptions about manufacturing jobs. He tells students that many jobs in law, finance and advertising exist to support manufactured products.

"The manufacturing food chain has been severely impaired because the plankton has been poisoned," Alyea said. "They've been convinced that they are losers, or they have to go to college, even if they don't know what they want to do. These are good jobs."

Wisely also reports for the Detroit Free Press

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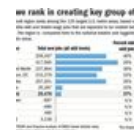
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